Moral values in Britain and in Russia

Final project in the course “World of Britain”

2017

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# Part 1. INTRODUCTION

What are moral values? In general, they mean the standards of good and evil, which govern individual’s behavior and choices. They determine the principles or habits with respect to right or wrong conduct. Value theory encompasses a range of approaches to understanding how, why, and to what degree humans should value things, whether the thing is a person, idea, object, or anything else. This investigation began in ancient philosophy, where it is called axiology or ethics. My final project is devoted to the differences and similarities between the vision of moral values in two countries – Russia and Great Britain. The main reason of it is to find out whether different approaches really do exist to this theme in the two countries, describe all possible reasons for this and examine the influence of the counties’ history, customs and traditions on their moral values.

Understanding the stages of certain moral attitudes formed in the ancient civilizations of both East and West. They included the idea of charity, honor, benefit, dignity, loyalty, courage etc. Along with the values and ideal orientations of moral consciousness (heroism, love, freedom) there appeared a value concept of “useful”, which summarized the positive values of something against the interests of the concrete individual. Ancient philosophers posited that the main reason for the appearance of morals was “eudaimonia”, which is translated as “happiness” though it means something more along the lines of “objective human flourishing” instead of the subjective and temporary feeling people nowadays associate with the contemporary conception of happiness. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and the Hellenistic Stoic and Epicurean Schools all held eudaimonistic accounts of ethics. And the range of “useful to humans in general” was very broad; it included the satisfaction of the higher needs. In comparison with “the benefits” and “the use”, “useful to human” meant a satisfying interest, at the expense of neglecting the interests of other people. Nowadays in both countries it has become a useful priority value, a key principal of enterprising consciousness that has led to its development and applications on theory of values, moral and ethics; it is dominated by the task of achieving almost behavioral result, which is the subject of moral self-realization.

The difference between values, morals and ethics is that despite the fact that they all provide behavioral rules, but the ethics tend to be codified into a formal system or set of rules which are explicitly adopted by a group of people (for example, teachers’ ethics, police ethics etc.); values, according to the Dictionary.com, are beliefs of a person or social group in which they have an emotional investment (either for or against something); (for example, "he has very conservatives values"); and morals have a greater social element to values and tend to have a very broad acceptance. Morals are far more about good and bad than other values. They may be defined as motivation based on ideas of right and wrong. Individual’s morals may derive from society and government, religion, or self. When moral values derive from society and government they, of necessity, may change as the laws and morals of the society change.

# Part 2. BRITAIN: IMPACT OF VICTORIAN MORALITY

The term “Victorian” owns a wide range of connotations, most specifically the strict moral standards. Victorian morality is a distillation of the moral views of people living at the time of Queen Victoria’s reign (1837 – 1901) and of the moral climate of the United Kingdom of the 19th century. It can be described as a set of values that supported sexual repression, low tolerance of crime and a strong social ethic. Due to the huge impact and great importance of the British Empire, many of these values were spread across the world.

Families with their traditions and respect were most important to Victorians. They encouraged hard work, respectability, social deference and religious conformity. The children (usually five or six in a family) were taught “to know their place”: for the parents the upbringing of their children was the extremely important duty and responsibility and they kept them is strictness. The aim was to bring up thoughtful and moral adults. A common saying in that time was: “Spare the rod and spoil the child” in which the Victorians believed.

*Photograph of Queen Victoria, 1882*

The moral code could be divided between genres: for men, morality depended on them being the centre of the family life and to have an honorable position in society. As for women, they were psychologically taught to get married and to serve as an emotional backup for their husbands and raise their children. Many people consider this period to be the era full of prudery, puritanism, sexual repression and moral strictness, especially for common, not middle-class or elite representatives.

Talking about the elite and middle class values, it is necessary to mention that at the start of the Victorian era, the elite were in total control of society and its politics. There were about 300 families which were established as the ruling class. However, new values (individualism, the idea of the self-made man who, if he works enough, can become wealthy and prosperous) were developing throughout the Victorian era. The upper-class valued history, heritage, lineage and the continuity of their family line. Noblesse oblige (the concept that nobility extends beyond mere entitlements and requires the person who holds such status to fulfill social responsibilities) was their belief that it was the elite’s duty to take care of society.

People searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society. These unrealistic expectations were perfectly described by Oscar Wilde. Analyzing the characters in his works, show how the expectations of society effects the characters’ behavior and their reaction to society’s ideals.  Oscar Wilde examined the impact of Victorian society’s unrealistic expectations on the individual in “The Importance of Being Earnest” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, showing how rejection, whether from a potential partner or society as a whole, can lead to deceit and engaging in a double life in order to satisfy conventions.

# Part 3. BRITAIN: MORAL VALUES AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION

Traditionally the Church has played an important role in Britain. It worked together with the family, the school and the government to educate children the basic moral values. Lately there has been a growing reluctance to teach values in religious educational system out of fear that children might be indoctrinated with a specific religious belief. Religious leaders do not agree on this point, they claim that all people share the same core values and it is possible to teach them apart from the context of a specific belief. The British people are worried about the fact that religion is becoming less important in the life of the young generation – that, in their opinion, had bad influence on teenagers’ morality. According to the BBC News, modern teenagers are better behaved than their counterparts 20 years ago. The results of the survey answered by pupils aged 14 and 15 indicate that the 2005 youngsters have less problematic behaviour as far as the points of truancy, vandalism, theft, fighting, drinking and drugs are concerned.

In the article published in “Telegraph” in July 2005, ten core values of the British identity are announced. Among them are:

1. The rule of law. Our society is based on the idea that we all abide by the same rules, whatever our wealth or status. No one is above the law - not even the government.
2. The sovereignty of the Crown in Parliament. The Lords, the Commons and the monarch constitute the supreme authority in the land. There is no appeal to any higher jurisdiction, spiritual or temporal.
3. The pluralist state. Equality before the law implies that no one should be treated differently on the basis of belonging to a particular group. Conversely, all parties, sects, faiths and ideologies must tolerate the existence of their rivals.
4. Personal freedom. There should be a presumption, always and everywhere, against state coercion. We should tolerate eccentricity in others, almost to the point of lunacy, provided no one else is harmed.
5. Private property. Freedom must include the freedom to buy and sell without fear of confiscation, to transfer ownership, to sign contracts and have them enforced. Britain was quicker than most countries to recognize this and became, in consequence, one of the happiest and most prosperous nations on Earth.
6. Institutions. British freedom and British character are immanent in British institutions. These are not, mostly, statutory bodies, but spring from the way free individuals regulate each other's conduct, and provide for their needs, without recourse to coercion.
7. The family. Civic society depends on values being passed from generation to generation. Stable families are the essential ingredient of a stable society.
8. History. British children inherit a political culture, a set of specific legal rights and obligations, and a stupendous series of national achievements. They should be taught about these things.

# Part 4. RUSSIA: CORE MORAL VALUES

Many foreigners are aware of the “mysterious Russian soul”. Such Russian features as emotionality, judgmental attitudes (with a tendency for ethical evaluation), fatalism and irrationality have influenced on the core Russian morals. The main one is the pride of the country, they accept that their lives are difficult and pride themselves on being able to flourish in conditions that others could not. Besides they take great pride in their cultural heritage and expect the rest of the world to admire it. They are cautious and conservative defenders of the country and of their status quo. Cruel climate and harsh history have caused Russians to value stability, security, social order and predictability, avoiding risks. The tried and tested is preferred to new and unknown.

The Russian historian and philosopher Ivan Ilyin said: “Europe cannot grasp us ... because the Slavic and Russian way of contemplating the world, nature, and man is something alien to it. Humanity in Western Europe is motivated by will and intellect. The Russian people are above all guided by their hearts and imaginations, relegating the mind and will to a supporting role. Therefore, the average European is ashamed of sincerity, scruples, and kindness, viewing them as "foolishness.”

The survey, conducted in Russia by Levada Analytical Center (non-governmental research organization in Russia) showed some interesting results answering the questions on how moral constraints of the Russian people were changing over the past two decades (since the collapse of the Soviet Union). The surveys were about Russian attitude to criticism of the government, theft at work and sex without love, having a lover:

**1). Do you think it is permissible to criticize the government?**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year 1992 | Year 1998 | Year 2009 | **Year 2013** |
| This is normal, permissible | 76 | 85 | 81 | **80%** |
| This isn’t normal, not permissible | 8 | 9 | 12 | **12%** |
| Hard to say | 16 | 6 | 5 | **8%** |

**2). Do you think it is permissible to have sex before marriage?**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year 1992 | Year 1998 | Year 2009 | **Year 2013** |
| This is normal, permissible | 42 | 52 | 53 | **58%** |
| This isn’t normal, not permissible | 36 | 39 | 37 | **31%** |
| Hard to say | 23 | 9 | 10 | **11%** |

**3). Do you think it is permissible to have lover/mistress in addition to husband/wife?**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year 1992 | Year 1998 | Year 2009 | **Year 2013** |
| This is normal, permissible | 26 | 34 | 36 | **34%** |
| This isn’t normal, not permissible | 47 | 51 | 52 | **50%** |
| Hard to say | 28 | 15 | 12 | **16%** |

**4). Do you think it is permissible to steal anything from job?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year 2009 | **Year 2013** |
| This is normal, permissible | 16 | **24%** |
| This isn’t normal, not permissible | 77 | **64%** |
| Hard to say | 7 | **12%** |

**5). Do you think it is permissible to have sex without love?**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year 1992 | Year 1998 | Year 2009 | **Year 2013** |
| This is normal, permissible | 16 | 26 | 32 | **40%** |
| This isn’t normal, not permissible | 57 | 59 | 51 | **43%** |
| Hard to say | 27 | 15 | 18 | **18%** |

Crime, government corruption and inequality are more visible now than 20 years ago. The political situation in our country has changed, so have done and moral values, too. When Russia was under communist rule, money was not as extremely important as it is today. There were shortages of things that most people in Britain didn’t suffer from: lack of qualitative products without long-hour queues, ability to travel around the world, even listen to foreign radio stations etc. Now store shelves are full of products, but the prices are so high that people both in Russia and Britain have to think a lot about money and how to earn it.

There has appeared a new notion in the psychology and philosophy – a “partial” person. It means a person who doesn’t take into consideration other people’s values, who interacts with others in order to achieve his or her goals only. Another novelty in our society is a “screw-man”, whose main characteristic is fear. He doesn’t take decisions or have his own opinion. This person obeys those who are more powerful, stronger, and he or she is not able to esteem the positive and negative acts. The process of globalization makes this problem more serious: the mass media (TV, Internet, radio, newspapers, magazines etc.) with their cruelty and violence have threatening impact on the personality and turn people into living robots many of whom are free from moral values and neglect the traditions of the society they live in.

# Part 5. MORAL VALUES AND RELIGION

The specific values that Russia sees as more congenial to international order are those shared by its four traditional religious communities – Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. Their comfortable interaction with each other and with the state itself demonstrates that religion need not be a source of conflict in the contemporary world. It’s no longer a top secret that the Orthodox Church in Russia is closely united with the state. It provides intellectual and moral support to many state policies, not because it has to, but only because it wants to. And the Russian moral framework of foreign policy nowadays is its view which the Church promotes as it believes that creating a “congenial international order” will assist it in its threefold mission – to save every human’s soul, to save all international cultures (that have been baptized into Christ) and to save all mankind in general. This is far from Britain’s separation of the Church and the State.

While Russian and British societies change over time, religion’s acceptance of new ideas (from human rights and equality to animal and environmental care) has lagged over generations. Bryan Wilson, the esteemed sociologist of religion, records that instead of shaping the morals of secular society, religion now slowly follows them. An effect of this lag is that Christian religion is more resistant to change its moral stances, find itself increasingly at odds with society at large. This is particularly true in the realm of human rights: most campaigners are engaged much of the time in struggles against religious groups, religious lobbies and religious activists who are opposed to different aspects of human rights. Typical battles occur over gender equality, tolerance of sexuality and the immorality of prejudice, abortion rights and women’s rights, animal welfare – not to mention other themes such as science education. And again, talking about British morals, the influence of Victorian morality on modern Britain is difficult to overestimate: the Victorians took the Bible as the literal truth and it was the foundation of moral behaviour which became known as “Victorianism”. During this period, textbooks and games were based on religion and morality. It was believed that if religion was accepted by all, morality would become the end of crimes and poverty.

After the 2008-2011 difficult period for Great Britain, when it witnessed a number of crises (financial collapse originating in the misselling of credit; the expenses scandal among parliamentarians; the telephone hacking scandal and the English riots of 2011 which caused not only national, but also international shock), David Cameron coined the phrase “Broken Britain” and subsequently that vision of a collapsing society was associated with family breakdown, substance abuse, crime and disengagement from social and political life. Many people argue that this decline of organized religion as a political and social force over the past few centuries is linked to a decline in moral values and behaviour.

# Part 6. MORAL VALUES AND POLITICS

The Victorians’ attitude to politics has influenced the perception of modern politics: they believed in the perfection of their evolved, representative government and in exporting it throughout the British Empire. The Victorian time saw the beginning and spread of political movements, most importantly socialism, liberalism and organized feminism. The social classes were newly reforming. The old hierarchical order was changing with the steady growing of the middle class. The composition of the upper class was changing from pure aristocracy to a combination of nobility and emerging wealthy gentlemen of commercial class. The definitions of 'lady' and 'gentleman' were constantly changing but towards the end of the century there was a silent agreement that a gentlemen was someone with a liberal public (private) school education, preferably from Eton, Rugby or Harrow, no matter what the ancestors had been. In contemporary Britain they have transformed into tolerance and respect of other person’s views.

In his article for the “Mail” on British values, published 15 June 2015, David Cameron stated: “The values I’m talking about – a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law – are the things we should try to live by every day. To me they’re as British as the Union Flag, as football, as fish and chips. Of course, people will say that these values are vital to other people in other countries. And, of course, they’re right. But what sets Britain apart are the traditions and history that anchors them and allows them to continue to flourish and develop.” He claimed that the British should promote these values because of the two reasons: economic and social. The values have a vital role to play in uniting the British people and ensuring that Britain not only brings together people from various countries, cultures and ethnicities, but also ensures that “together, we build a common home”.

*David Cameron in the underground  
 on his way to work*

In the annual state of the national address in December 2013, Vladimir Putin sought to cast Russia as the moral arbiter of the world as he hit out at America’s “non-traditional values” and its influence across the world. “We do not infringe on anyone’s interests, we do not force our patronage on anyone, or try to teach anyone how to live,” he said. His comments amounted to an oblique rebuttal to the growing international movement against Russia’s restrictive laws on homosexuality. Support for a boycott of Russia in the run up to the Sochi Winter Olympic Games has widened with celebrities announcing they will not perform in Russia. Others including Joachim Gauck, the German president, have declined invitations for the event. Vladimir Putin defended his government’s increasingly conservative values and decried the “review of norms of morality” in the West and elsewhere. In his speech, the President hinted at what Russian values might be for him: the lessons of the Orthodox Church, the battle honors of the Russian Armed Forces and the legacies of Russian self-government within a tradition of strong central leadership.

# Part 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention that the differences between the moral values in Russia and Britain are derived from their historical peculiarities, nations’ mentalities, customs and traditions, and even their geographical positions. Russian moral framework, especially when referred to modern Russian foreign policy, differs from Britain’s in some aspects: the Russian people have never been the people of culture based on the principles of rationality. The roots of Russian polarization and inconsistency come from the collision of two flows in history – the West and the East. They are the people of revelations and inspiration: two contradictory beginnings lie in the foundation of the Russian soul – pagan nature and monastic Orthodoxy. And this duality penetrates the moral values – the supremacy of the law, faith in God or in politic leaders, deification of them during the Soviet period in its history, the concept of family etc., including the core values such as understanding the difference between the good and the evil, justice, love, happiness of humans and the concrete individual.

Interestingly enough, the ancient Russian literature never included tales of personal enrichment through conquest or plunder, although it was a common theme in European canon. The hero of “The Nibelungs" is obsessed with his search for a hidden treasure - the Rheingold. The main character of the ancient English poem "Beowulf" dies, having beheld "the gorgeous heirlooms, golden store”. The ancient pagan Russian people didn’t even have the god of war – the morals of protection of the native country were and are still strong both among people of these two nations, but the British tend to be more bellicose and mercenary.

Besides the impact of the later Victorian era is huge: the standards of strictness, puritanism, social defense, respectability, religious conformity and moral strictness are still relevant among the British people. Moreover, in counterbalance to strictness there appeared individualism, the concept of a self-made person, which nowadays can be noticed in British striving for freedom in any aspects: self-expression, vanguard art, a subtle sense of humor. The value of “home” is significantly important to both nations: they both are hospitable and welcoming, support the idea of a stable family with many family’s friends and relatives. They support communication and keep in touch with family members, relatives and friends.

Some experts say there is absolutely nothing in common between the British and Russian people. But this opinion may turn out not to be the truth: their morals are in many ways similar with the crucial difference: the British people tend to make decisions guided by their mind, and the Russian – with their emotional rush, with their heart (and later regret it in many cases).

# Part 8. SOURCES

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